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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 001036

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP, EAP/BCLTV, INR/B  
PACOM FOR FPA (HUSO)  
OSD FOR OSD/ISA (STERN AND POWERS)

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TH](#) [BURMA](#) [IRAQ](#) [POL](#) [MIL](#)

SUBJECT: THAILAND: AMBASSADOR CALLS ON DEFENSE MINISTER  
SUMPUN

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce. Reason: 1.4 (d)

[11.](#) (C) SUMMARY: During an introductory call on Defense Minister Sumpun Boonyanun February 3, Ambassador discussed a wide range of subjects and positively reaffirmed the overall excellent relations between our two militaries. They exchanged views on the tsunami relief effort and overall U.S./Thai military cooperation; ongoing violence in southern Thailand and regional terrorism; Burma; Iraq; and the sale of U.S. F-16s to Thailand. END SUMMARY.

TSUNAMI RELIEF

SIPDIS

[12.](#) (C) On February 3, Ambassador made a formal introductory call on Minister of Defense Sumpun Boonyanun. On the regional impact of the tsunami, Sumpun expressed his, and Thailand's gratitude for the immediate and significant U.S. relief effort in Thailand. Sumpun noted that the MOD had been in contact with the U.S. the day of the disaster, and the U.S. had dispatched the first C-130 within 24 hours. Ambassador agreed that the impressive display of our militaries, and those of other countries, working together showed the benefits of years of joint training and operations. He thanked Sumpun for the use of the Utapao Naval Air Base, noting it had saved lives throughout the region. Sumpun noted that Admiral Thana, 3rd Naval Area Commander, and General Boonsrang, Supreme Command Chief of Staff had reported that the cooperation and coordination between the Thai and U.S. military at Utapao and in the Phuket area has been excellent.

[13.](#) (C) Ambassador asked Sumpun if Thailand planned to dispatch additional aid or relief personal to Indonesia, noting that images of Thai soldiers helping Muslims would pay dividends with Thailand's Muslim neighbors, and with Thailand's own Muslim population. Sumpun said they were considering sending aid in addition to the one C-130 supply relief mission they had dispatched earlier.

VIOLENCE IN THE SOUTH

[14.](#) (C) Ambassador asked Sumpun for his assessment of the current situation in southern Thailand and the likely prospects for the future. Sumpun said that it was important to bear in mind the historical context of the violence; noting that problems between ethnically Malay-Muslims and Buddhist-Thais go back "hundreds of years." Sumpun noted that there remained deep cultural divisions between the two populations that needed to be addressed. He said that he believed that education and job creation were keys to ending the violence and the Muslim's alienation. Sumpun admitted that security remained a problem in the south and that the RTG had not found an effective formula for dealing with the common "hit and run" style attacks used by the militants. Sumpun also admitted that the RTG had experienced some difficulty identifying the perpetrators, but claimed that there were no more than 3,000 committed militants behind the violence.

[15.](#) (C) Ambassador asked Sumpun about newspaper reports that a new infantry division was being created for the south. Sumpun said Prime Minister Thaksin had asked the Cabinet to approve creation of the 15th Infantry Division. He said that the division would not have a combat role, but would work on engineering, medical, and civil affairs projects. Sumpun confirmed that the division would report directly to Royal Thai Army headquarters.

INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM

[16.](#) (C) The Minister indicated that the specter of international terrorism remained a concern for the Thai government. Sumpun said that the RTG was well aware that the long-term goal of Jemaah Islamiah (JI) was the inclusion of southern Thailand into a regional Islamic state. While they are taking JI seriously, and remained vigilant, the RTG has not found direct evidence of its presence in southern Thailand. Sumpun said the RTG remained concerned that other

transitional terror groups would try to "take advantage" of the situation in the south.

#### BURMA

17. (C) Ambassador asked Sumpun about the situation in Burma, particularly the swirling rumors of ongoing leadership struggles. Sumpun demurred, repeatedly saying that "there are a lot of unknowns" regarding the regime. He noted that Supreme Commander Chaisit had spent two days in Burma in January, and had met with all members of the junta's leadership. However, Sumpun cautioned that he didn't trust these "outward expressions from the Burmese," and again reiterated that the country remains a mystery, even to the Thais.

#### IRAQ

18. (C) Ambassador raised the subject of Iraq, and prospects for another Thai deployment. Ambassador acknowledged the sensitivity of the issue given the current situation in the south, and also the sensitivity of Thailand's Muslim neighbor. Sumpun indicated that some form of deployment remained under consideration, but the timing and scope had not been determined. He studiously avoided further elaboration. Sumpun did inquire about additional training opportunities through International Military Education and Training (IMET) program.

#### F-16s

19. (C) Ambassador made a strong, direct pitch for a positive decision on the purchase of U.S. F-16s as Thailand retires its aging fleet of F-5 fighters. While acknowledging the advantages for inter-operability and the positive RTAF experience with the F-16, as well as Thailand's long-term goal of buying into the Joint Strike Fighter program, Sumpun remained non-committal. He indicated that he understood the obvious drawbacks of both the Swedish Gripen and the Russian SU-30, but said that the RTG was still involved in serious discussions with the Russians over trading chicken for the SU-30, as offsets remained a primary consideration for the deal.

BOYCE